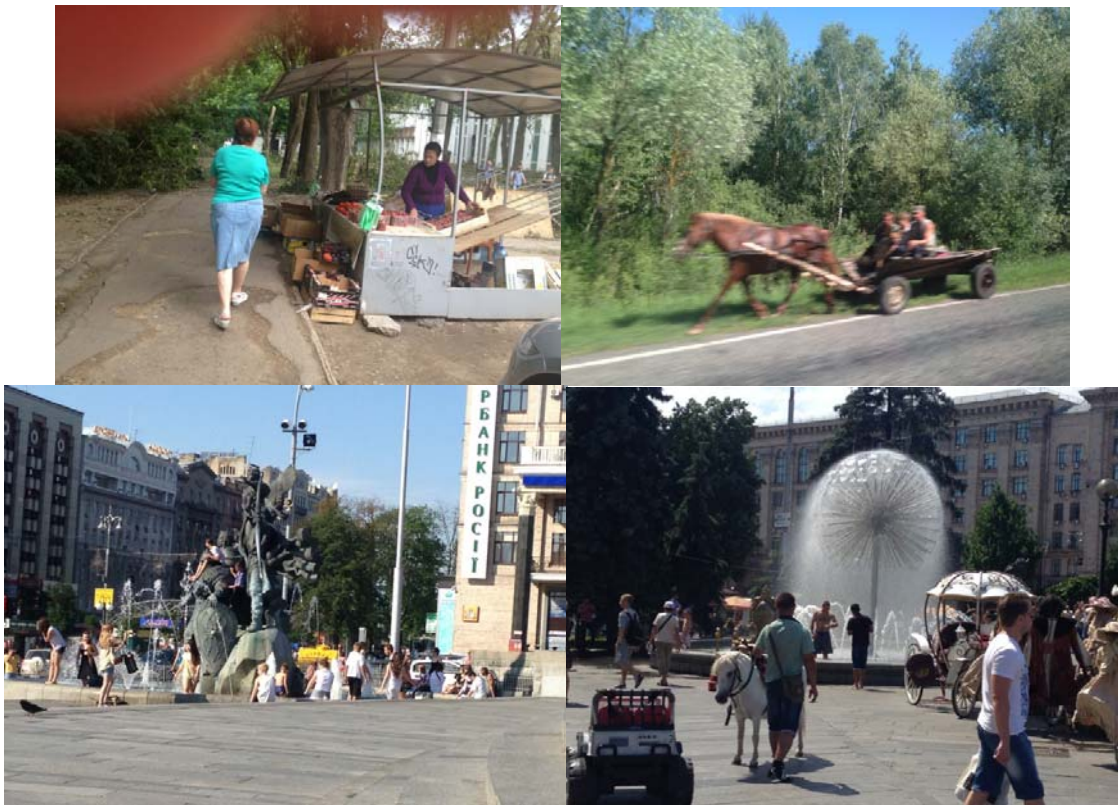


Odessa – I wished I didn't have to leave plus a weekend in Kiev

My first day in Ukraine was altogether one of the most exciting, frustrating, and rewarding days of my life. I came to Ukraine a beginner in Russian language, with barely enough words to even order a meal. I left the U.S. on a Friday, expecting to arrive Sunday morning in Odessa. My connecting flight was cancelled in Moscow, and I was stuck in the terminal at Sheremetyevo Airport for 17 hours.

The first few days were very tough: finding my way around, trying to get food, and adjusting to different living conditions, but it got easier every day. I started noticing charming local nuances I would never have seen back home, like people selling fresh fruit and bread from sidewalk stands, and children splashing around the public water fountains on hot days. By the third week, I actually came to love it, and wished I didn't have to leave.



I studied four hours every morning, and I was given two to three hours of homework. Some days I spent four or five hours studying on top of that... at least until the sun came out on the fifth day and I began spending my afternoons at the beach.



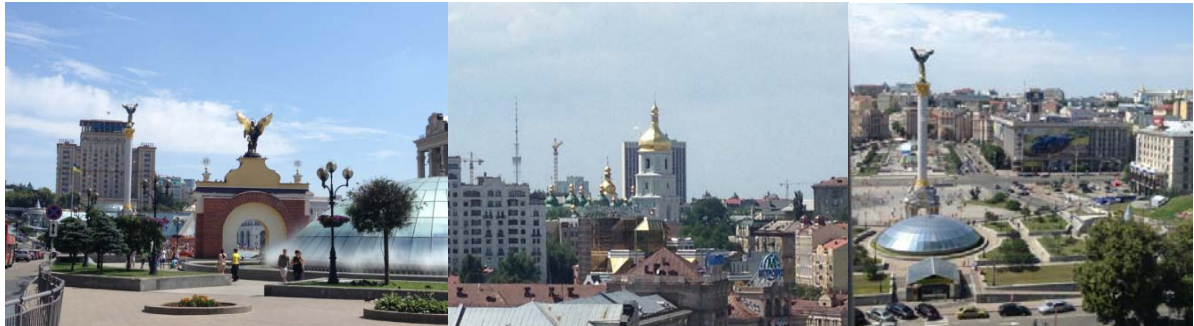
Somewhere near the start of the second week, I started becoming more adept at putting sentences together and carrying on conversations in Russian. I developed the ability to order food, ask for directions (and even gave them once!), and converse with locals. I had a great time with the other students in the program, some of whom have become good friends. People came and went all summer, staying for various amounts of time. Though I was the only American there, several of the other students spoke some English. We started meeting every afternoon post-lessons to chat and make plans. Several of us went to the opera house together, where we saw Don Quixote, and found a place for a steak dinner downtown.



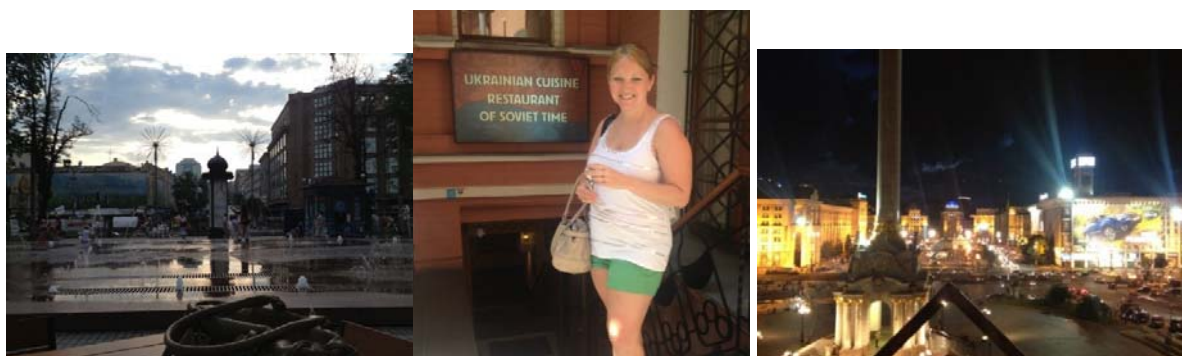
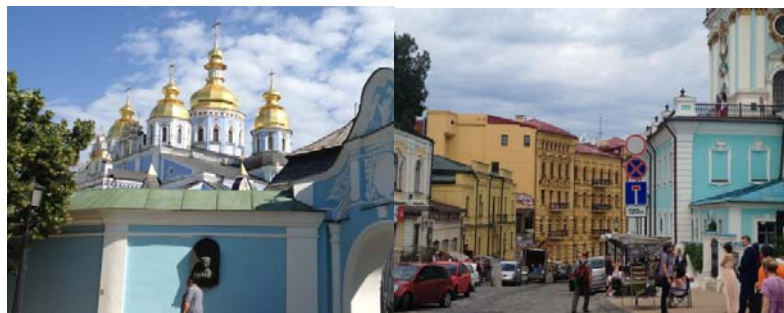
I went frequently to an Italian restaurant down the street from the student hostel, where the waiter (Yuri) was happy to help me with my Russian, while practicing his English. I spent many evenings studying there, while Yuri helped me work through mistakes in my homework, cooked amazing local food for me, and taught me a lot about Ukrainian culture and history. We switched back and forth between languages, often stopping to explain our meaning, which helped me pick up on local customs and sense of humor. He helped me with my accent in Russian, and I got several compliments on it from my teachers. After a couple weeks of daily interaction, I found myself inadvertently picking up his accent even when I spoke English.

By the middle of the second week, my language skills were improving rapidly, so I decided to spend a weekend in Kiev by myself. When I arrived in Kiev, I stepped off the train into the most beautiful city I'd ever seen. The first thing I realized as I left the train station was that I had forgotten to actually plan anything for Kiev; I had just arrived with no plan. I went back into the train station and asked in Russian where I could buy a

map. I spent the next thirty minutes looking up cultural and historical sites and marking them on my map. I hailed a taxi, and decided to start at the National Art Museum.



Afterward, I walked down to St. Alexander's Cathedral to look around, where I discovered a wall off in a corner with paintings of what they called the *Communist Inquisition*. The photos of the famine in Ukraine were heart-rending. I spent a little more time walking around the city, and then walked to see the cathedral, St. Andrew's. As I walked up to the square where the church sat, I was struck again by the intrinsic charm of Kiev. There was an accordion player playing a plucky tune in front of the church, a wedding party walking down the steps, and a row of beautifully colored old townhomes: all set to the backdrop of a hill overlooking downtown with a majestic sea-blue cathedral atop it.



On my second day, I met up with a group to head out to Chernobyl, which turned out to be the most intense, amazing, meaningful, and once-in-a-lifetime thing I got to do while I was there. I have no words of description for an experience like this; even pictures don't capture what it felt like to be there, but it is well worth the trouble to make the trip.



By the time I got back to Odessa, I was down to one week left in Ukraine. I shared the train car on the way back with a local who, fulfilling my favorite of the Russian stereotypes, snuck some world-class vodka on the train in a milk carton. As the train pulled out of the station, he poured two glasses and shared with me his vodka and his dinner. My Russian was still limited of course, and he had no English; but we did manage to communicate quite a bit, and I got a lot of practice in conversational Russian. When I got back to Odessa, I settled back into my routine of lessons all morning, beach all afternoon, studying all evening, and going out with Yuri and the other students at night.



As my days drew to a close, my excitement to go home was mixed with a twinge of sadness. I was going to miss the people I met, the teachers that were so good to me, and the charm of the cities I'd visited while I was here. Before I left, I exchanged gifts with my teachers, and saw my favorite waiter one last time. He put together a CD of Ukrainian music for me, which I have been listening to since I returned.



The flight home was much different than the flight there had been. This time I was able to communicate with the flight attendants, which was thrilling. There was an unusual custom I noticed on the three Russian flights I'd been on so far: every time a plane lands on the runway, whether a two hour flight or a ten hour, everybody claps. I don't know if it's a show of appreciation for pilot skills, of gratitude for making it safely, or of relief that the flight has finally taken off and eventually made it to its destination—but it didn't matter to me. This time, I joined in.



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