

## **My time in Odessa**

My first day in Odessa I remember thinking I had made a big mistake. I had a great deal of trouble making small talk with Alexander, the gentleman who picked me up from the airport. And when I arrived at 28 Prospekt Gagarina to meet my wonderful hosts, Viktor and Olga, we quickly ran out of conversation. This was not because there was nothing to say; quite the opposite in fact – there was so much to say. But through some combination of jet lag, nervousness, and a sudden realization that I would not be able to fall back on using English, I fell awkwardly into silence. “This could be a long six weeks,” I thought to myself.

Six weeks later, I was happy to be mistaken. While I still occasionally made silly mistakes and did not always understand people in the street, my time in Odessa was an extremely enriching and worthwhile experience. This began from my first day of class at the University, when I was given two diagnostic tests to determine what level I should start with. I had not taken such a thorough assessment before, since I was only a relative beginner at the time. The test was obviously helpful to my teacher, Natalya, but it was also instructive for me.

Natalya was a tough but fair instructor. It took me a little while to appreciate her sense of humor, which was pretty dry, but with time we developed what I felt was a very productive rapport with each other. Each class would begin with a discussion of a short story I had read the night before, often a rasskaz by Chekhov. We would then review my grammar homework and spend the next several hours going over new grammar. It was a bit of a grueling schedule – 4.5 hours of lessons each day – but it was exactly what I asked for, and well worth it.

In addition to language instruction, Lydia, the director of the program, arranged several cultural excursions during my stay. These included tours of central Odessa and the city’s religious landmarks. The highlight, however, was our trip to the catacombs. Dating back to the earliest days of Odessa’s founding, the catacombs apparently underneath most of the city and out into the countryside. They were most famously used as a refuge for resistance fighters trying to stave off invasion by the Nazis and their allies. Odessa is a city with some remarkable cultural and historical artifacts, from the opera house to the philharmonic, but the catacombs (which have been well-maintained) made the deepest impression on me as a symbol of the city’s resilience.

In addition to culture, Odessa has a pretty vibrant nightlife. Though I was there primarily to study, I did make it to the famous Arcadia beach a few times. If you like the club scene, it is a must. Even if you don’t, it’s worth going once for the people-watching and to get a feel for how young Odessans have fun. And of course you have to go to the beach. I’m not much of a beach person, but even I went pretty often.

I would be remiss if I did make special mention of Viktor and Olga. I could not have asked for two more warm and welcoming hosts. Every day Olga prepared me a breakfast that was so big I usually had to save some for later. (I learned from other

students that this was the exception, not the rule, so I counted myself doubly fortunate.) Olga very kindly walked around the neighborhood with me to point out the nearest grocery store, beach, cafes, etc. She even lent me a flashlight when the street lamps on Gagarina were out of commission. And Viktor was just an amazing person to talk to. He was an accomplished physicist who helped track American nuclear submarines during the Cold War! I was truly blessed to stay with those two.

As I carry on with my study of Russian back in the States, I look back on Odessa with fondness and satisfaction, knowing that it was time well spent.

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