

The Washington Post

Visiting Kiev, the capital of Ukraine and a cradle of Russian culture

By John Pancake

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Some cities are love at first sight. People fall for Paris in the taxi from the airport.

Others take you slowly. Kiev is like that.

I've walked the streets of this Ukrainian capital almost every day for a year. I've watched white-tailed eagles on a vast swampy island in the middle of the Dnieper River, listened as unseen nuns filled a vaulted church with their harmonies, marveled at the parade of tall women in stilettos clicking confidently down icy sidewalks and suffered a mild concussion myself when my feet shot out from under me in a frozen alley.

I've passed markers commemorating millions of murders. I've negotiated for a baggie of turmeric with a man from Samarkand. I've lost my bearings in candlelit catacombs, felt the sting of the winter wind on the city's high bluffs, watched twilight envelop golden-domed churches and talked to the genius behind the city's strangest museum. (And I'm not talking about the toilet museum, either.)

I've discovered wooden windmills, taxi-driver poets, gilded icons, robed monks, blues singers, cheap river cruises, horseradish vodka and a few new things about myself. Perhaps the only thing I haven't encountered in Kiev is a dull day. It is an unsung capital, full of surprises. During the day, you may be startled by the sudden cascade of sound that tumbles out of churches on religious holidays -- the "raspberry bells," it's called. By night, you may flinch at the concussion of the boisterous fireworks that Ukrainians send arcing over the city four or five nights a month.

Sixteen months ago, I walked away from my desk at The Post. Shortly afterward, my wife landed an 18-month job in Ukraine.

We arrived on a fall day as the sun was setting and had our first meal at Oscar's Place, a three-table restaurant on the street where we'd be living. My wife, who speaks

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Russian, told the barmaid that it was my first night in Ukraine. Don't order, she replied. I'll bring you real Ukrainian food. She did. And it was great, though the first dish -- salo, slices of raw pork fat served on black bread -- is best if washed down with vodka.

Since then, I've been spending the afternoons writing and exploring the city and the mornings studying Russian. (Almost everybody in Kiev speaks both Russian and Ukrainian. I picked Russian because I've always dreamed of reading Chekhov in his native tongue.)

I began with a seven-word vocabulary: Yes, no, please, thank you, hello, goodbye and beer ("peevo"). That was enough to get started. People I met were happy to communicate. Gestures and pantomime worked wonders when words failed. I found myself thinking: I doubt this would work with the French.

To my chagrin, I found that people sometimes addressed me in English before I opened my mouth. Was it my clothes? No, I was usually wearing black jeans and a black pullover, like every other man in town. Shoes? In Washington, I could always spot tourists by their shoes. But my low black boots were exactly what many Ukrainians had on. Finally I asked. Turned out, it was my face. I never thought I looked American, but apparently I do, at least in Slavic

countries. Most people here have better cheekbones than Tom Cruise. I don't.

Kiev is an old city, one of the cradles of Russian culture. The Russians, in fact, call it the mother of cities. Legend has it that in A.D. 560, three Viking brothers rowed down the Dnieper with their sister at the steering oar. She picked the spot where they settled and named it for the eldest brother, Kyi. Sounds like she was in charge.

Although Kiev is spread out along both sides of the Dnieper, I generally walk the oldest sections, which are scattered along the hills of the west bank. The golden domes of churches, monasteries and bell towers adorn the ridge above the river, as if some giant had dropped a handful of Christmas decorations. The center of Kiev remains a remarkably intimate place for a big city (2.7 million). Not many high rises.

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Lots of quirky streets and eccentric apartment buildings festooned with sculptural reliefs -- lions here, gods and goddesses there, laurel wreaths above the windows. There's a concrete rhino poking out of one building. And in some sections, the facades are frosted with a layer of ceramic tile.

If you squint past the drab Soviet architecture that mars some of the city, you can see enormous beauty. But there is sadness in it. People used to say that New Orleans was "the city that care forgot." Nobody ever said that about Kiev.

Everywhere, you sense layers of tragedy and rebirth. The churches of Kiev make the point. Near our flat, you can find the remains of a church destroyed by invaders in the 13th century. A few hundred yards away, on the same hilltop, stands St. Michael's Monastery of the Golden Domes, home to my favorite bells. A church has been on that spot for more than 900 years, but today's lovely cerulean building is a recent reconstruction of an old church that communists blew up in the 1930s.

The nearby streets include ornate pre-Soviet facades and a few cold examples of Stalinist gigantism. You meet many self-congratulatory statues but scads of modest, carefully sculpted portraits, too. They're easy to miss. Most jut just above eye level from the sides of old apartment buildings.

Each shows a distinguished painter or agronomist or writer or ballet master . . . who had an apartment in the building the memorial is bolted to. As you walk along, you think of the aging physicist skittering across a frozen curb here or the lovely actress memorizing lines from "Uncle Vanya" on a park bench just there.

On one of my earliest walks, not far from our flat, I found a small stone sculpture of the silhouette of a child inside the outline of a robed woman, perhaps an angel. It commemorates the Great Famine of 1932-33. Unlike most famines, this one was man-made. Ultimately, the man who made it was Stalin. He demanded impossible amounts of grain for export. Desperate to comply, local bosses kept supplies of grain locked in warehouses while Ukrainians starved. Estimates of the death toll range from 2.5 million to nearly 10 million. It was mostly

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ignored in the West.

Children suffered terribly. Some people survived by eating corpses. Standing in the wind in front of the memorial and feeling very small, I tried to grasp the enormity of it.

Perhaps because my great-grandfather Capt. Frank C. Robbins fought there, I think about the carnage of Gettysburg, one of the bloodiest battles of America's bloodiest war. Seven thousand died at Gettysburg, so -- assuming that 5 million died -- Ukraine's Great Famine killed more than 700 Gettysburgs.

The worst of the famine was not here in Kiev, but in villages. But walking down the city's lovely old streets, passing people whose families almost all endured the famine, you can't help admiring the grit and grace of Ukrainians.

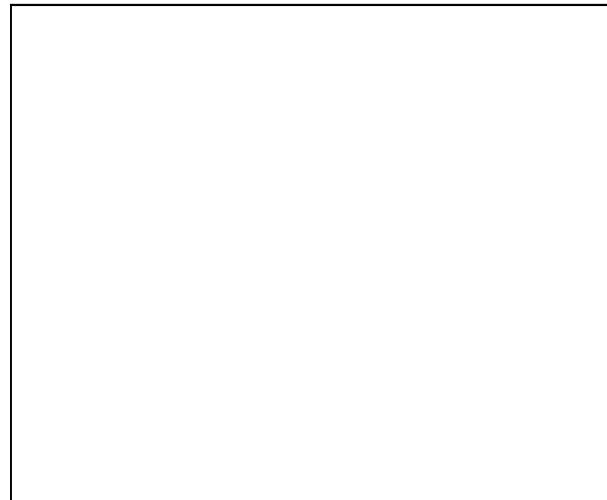
Ukrainians don't get a lot of respect from Westerners. Theirs is the largest country in Europe, save for the European part of Russia. Ukraine was part of the Russian empire and then a republic within the Soviet Union. It became independent in 1991. A pro-Western government took over after the peaceful protests of the "Orange Revolution" of 2004. But a lot of Americans think it is still part of Russia. Someone in the United States sent a letter to a friend here addressed to "Kiev, Russia." It arrived.

When I think of the city, the color that comes to mind is not orange but green. It's a very leafy place.

A beautiful string of parks stretches along the hills above the river. It's probably the best walk in the city. Eventually, you reach the high-walled Kiev-Pechersk Lavra. Once one of the most important centers of Orthodox Christianity and home to 1,000 monks, it was taken over by the Soviet government in 1930. Religious activities resumed over time. Today, some buildings are secular cultural museums and some are part of a religious complex operated by the Orthodox Church.

Beneath several of the churches is a labyrinth of tunnels, used by reclusive monks in times gone by and now the resting place for many saints. Carved into the 660

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yards of stone tunnels are a number of tiny, elegant churches fitted with glittering gold icons. Parts of the cave complex are open to the public. For me, lighting a candle and walking through the cramped, whitewashed passages is both strange and moving. Along with tourists, devout worshipers come here to kneel and pray next to the small, glass-topped coffins.

Part of the Lavra encompasses the secular exhibitions -- which run the gamut from displays of ornamental gold fashioned by the mysterious Scythian peoples who once ruled the Ukrainian steppe to the marvelously quirky Museum of Micro-Miniatures.

The latter grew out of the imagination of one man, Mykola Syadristy, who set out to make items so tiny they could only be appreciated when viewed through microscopes. My favorite consists of a human hair, drilled hollow and then polished to transparency. Inside this tiny tube, Syadristy managed to insert a miniature rose.

Now 72, Syadristy often hangs around the museum. His picture is on the wall, and it's easy to pick him out if he's there. One afternoon, my friend Karen, who speaks fluent Russian, and I struck up a conversation with him. We thought he would regale us with stories of his secret techniques -- how he made the minuscule

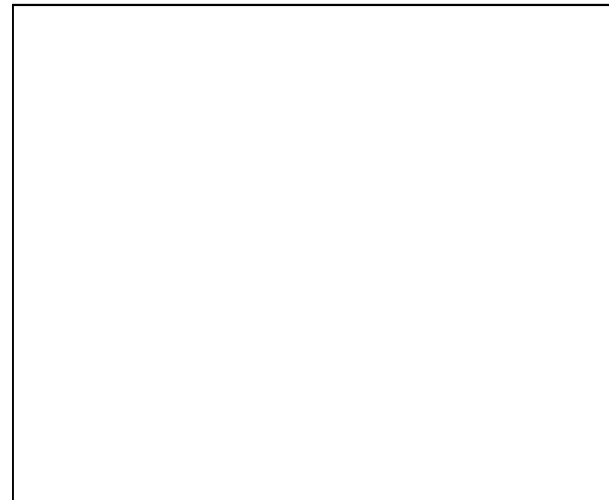
maiden with an umbrella who sits on the proboscis of a life-size golden mosquito, or how he placed an entire desert caravan inside the eye of a needle.

Our initial question produced an uninteruptible 15-minute oration, but it wasn't about how he put a chess set on the head of a pin. It was about Marx, Engels, Lenin and the shortcomings of Ukraine's current leadership.

The more you talk to Ukrainians, the more you realize that for all their toughness, their hearts have been broken by politicians.

President Viktor Yushchenko, who led the Orange Revolution, seemed poised to become the country's George Washington. But in the run-up to this winter's election, his approval rating is in the neighborhood of 2 to 3 percent, making him perhaps the

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world's most unpopular elected leader. Part of the reason is that the financial crisis that shook the United States has been catastrophic here. You wonder how much Ukrainians can take. Unemployment is up. The economy is sagging. People who have been sacked can't get at their savings because banks are in trouble.

But you can walk the streets here and still see plenty of shiny cars threading their way around the rattling Russian-designed Ladas. On the sidewalks march Ukrainian women in glittering shoes and fur-trimmed leather jackets. On the outskirts, marshy fields erupt with hulking McMansions.

It's as if Ukraine is somehow sure that its encounter with misfortune will have a storybook ending, an attitude captured in the local saying: If Khevrya hadn't fallen into the puddle, she wouldn't have gotten married. Although no handsome stranger has pulled Kiev out of the mud lately, people here have a profound understanding of misfortune.

The reality of that hits home as you walk south from the old monastic citadel. The city falls away on either side and the view is dominated by Kiev's perhaps most dramatic landmark: Rodina Mat, the mother of the country.

She is tall, she is titanium, she has a 53-ton sword, she is not particularly happy.

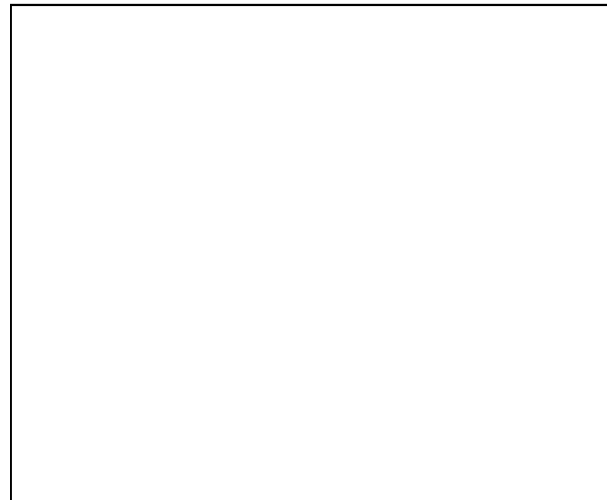
The statue stands atop a museum dedicated to World War II's Eastern Front, and the story inside the museum is more than sobering. Moving through the museum, I often wonder why I knew so little of it until now.

In history courses in high school and college, I got the standard American account of the war: Blitzkrieg, Dunkirk, Battle of Britain, Churchill with a defiant cigar, D-Day, pretty girls showering GIs with flowers in Paris, Battle of the Bulge, our tanks rumbling toward Hitler's bunker. Victory.

Well, no.

Walking through the museum made me want to learn more about the "Great Patriotic War" and the mammoth battles of the Eastern Front.

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In the United States, we revere my father's contemporaries as the "Greatest Generation." And their bravery and sacrifice is beyond question. But when the Greatest Generation handed down the story of the war in Europe, they often neglected to mention that it was the Red Army that broke Hitler's back.

The Soviet losses were staggering. In 1941, at the First Battle of Kiev -- which I had never really heard of before I got here -- the Soviet army suffered 700,000 killed, wounded and captured. If you count German losses and civilian carnage, the figure approaches 1 million -- or 20 to 25 Gettysburgs, where 50,000 were killed or wounded. That's just one of the battles fought at Kiev. There were others.

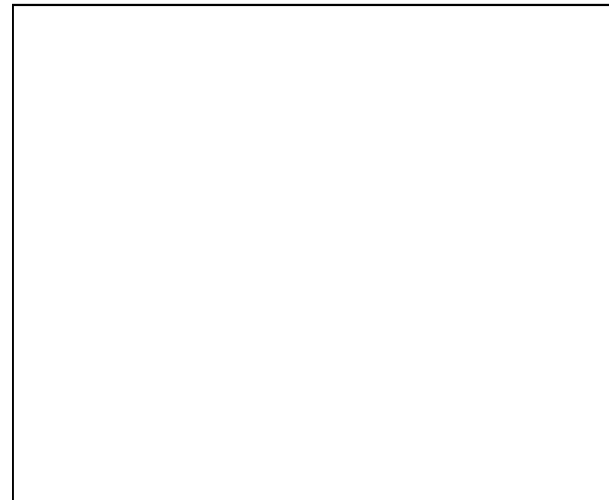
Then there's the secluded gully where in two days in September 1941, the victorious Germans shot 33,771 Jews. Executions of Jews, communists, partisans, gypsies and others continued at the Babi Yar ravine until 1943. A hundred thousand may have died there. Maybe more.

The Soviets erected a grandiose marker in a nearby park in 1976 but didn't quite have room on the tablet to mention that the people shot to death were mostly Jews. Eventually a memorial in the shape of a menorah was built in the woods nearby, overlooking the lip of the ravine.

Yet despite all this sadness and grief, there is wonder and splendor, too. Twist your way down the street known as St. Andrew's Descent, past the wedding-cake architecture of St. Andrew's Church and the tiny cafes clinging to the slope, and you can almost image you are seeing Kiev 100 years ago, when the great novelist Mikhail Bulgakov ("The Master and Margarita") lived and worked in a little house on the right.

To find much of this charm, you must look around, or at least understand, the top layer of the city: the Soviet layer. It has a special grimness. Peeling back the layers of a place takes time. I was in Miami for 16 years and spent most of the time trying to figure out what was at the heart of it. It's a slippery place. I never got to the center, but I did figure out that the center wasn't very important. It was what was on the glittering

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surface that mattered.

Kiev is the opposite, I think. Yes, it's a city with plenty of tricks. But it has been around for more than 14 centuries. Kiev knows who it is.

The place where I feel the heart of Kiev most intensely is looking at the green and golden domes of St. Sophia's Cathedral. This building somehow survived the attack of Batu Khan and his Golden Horde in the 13th century. Down the street, the khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, burned down an even older church with 3,000 Kievans inside. St. Sophia's also survived the czars, the Bolshevik Revolution and Hitler. It survived Stalin's penchant for blowing churches to smithereens.

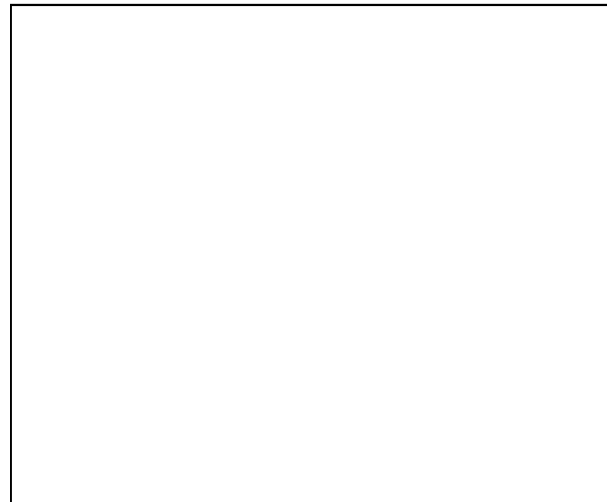
Kievans tell of a legend that the call of the city's church bells can weave a shield over the city.

Looking at them with my foreign eyes, I consider the centuries of faith here and think about being from a culture where a shield involves missiles or lasers.

And it occurs to me that when I leave, the thing I will miss most of all will be the bells.

Pancake is a former Washington Post editor.

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