

Getting Lost in Kiev

I don't exactly get lost deliberately. But I know that adventures happen that way, and I don't go to the lengths I might to prevent getting lost. At 21 I was lost in rural Norway, and a young child pointed me in the right direction when I drew a picture of a railroad train. At 27, in 1971, I got lost in Nablus in the West Bank and was rescued by a friendly Palestinian. So it is nothing new. But some memorable adventures came in 1991, when my wife and I were traveling in the Ukraine.

The group we were traveling with, organized by Elderhostel, was spending a week each at three teachers' colleges, in Kherson, Odessa, and Kiev. Each morning the faculty gave us some talks on local history and culture, afternoons were for sightseeing, and evenings were spent talking with the local students so they could practice English with a native speaker.

This was the summer before the Soviet Union dissolved, and there was a considerable sense of openness, but the Soviet agency Intourist still had a fairly heavy hand on the tourist part of the itinerary. My wife and I travel to meet people much more than to see monuments and mountains, and often escaped from the tour group when the day's schedule looked like it wouldn't include much chance to mix with the local people.

Wandering on our own in Kiev, we visited a newly-opened independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the people still excited by the idea of a church that was not state-controlled. The only icons were paper ones, printed by the Ukrainian Church in exile in Massachusetts. And we walked along the hilltop park looking down on the river valley.

As we walked along, we were approached by an older couple. "Are you Jewish?", the man asked. Yes, I am - I don't know if it was my nose, my beard, or my tourist group name tag that suggested the question to him. "Would you like to see the synagogue?"

They led my wife and I for what seemed like miles through the city. It was always "just a little bit further", but eventually, exhausted, we got there. It was the sole surviving synagogue of Kiev in 1991. There had been hundreds, we were told, in the 1930's: three survived the Nazis and one survived the Communists. It was a fascinating visit.

But now we had to get home. Could we avoid the long walk? Our hosts gave directions on the subway. Needless to say, we made a wrong turn and were soon hopelessly lost, somewhere in the underground of Kiev. And I now realized that our hotel key had no name on it, and in the excitement of the day I'd forgotten the name of our hotel.

Any hints? Yes, our hotel room had a view of a very large sports stadium. If I could find the stadium, I could probably manage to find the hotel. Inquiries of people on the platform failed to find anyone who spoke any language I knew, but studying the signs in the station (based on an incomplete knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet) revealed a name in what must be a list of stations that seemed to say "Stadion". No doubt the same sign said something like "take the Blue Line North" but I couldn't read that. I took to walking up and down the platform as if searching for something, and inquiring of those waiting for a train, "Stadion? Stadion?"

A young and athletic man appeared. In pantomime and a few words of English, he indicated that he was a runner and actually raced in the “Stadion.” Did I want to visit the Stadion? I’m not sure how well he understood my answer, but he volunteered to take us to see the Stadion.

As he led us through the various subway changes, we managed to communicate somewhat more. If he was disappointed that we weren’t actually sports fans, he didn’t show it. He took great delight in befriending visiting Americans and swapping the limited observations we could about the United States and the Ukraine. When we arrived at the stadium, I could see my hotel window up the hill; we were found. We thanked him profusely and gave him a small American flag, which he seemed to think was wonderful.

It was by no means the only time locals in the Ukraine befriended us - not even the only time on this trip that we managed to get lost and have an adventure. But it helped build a feeling for the Ukraine that we still treasure. And my wife and I are still very willing to head off on an adventure, even if we are not at all sure where we are going.

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