

A report on what we did with our 2008 summer vacation with excerpts from the Beatles' 1968 hit; "*Back in the U.S.S.R.*";

This was our third trip to explore the former Soviet Union. We flew to Istanbul, and then took a bus to Bulgaria where we joined a small cruise ship for a trip around the Black Sea and up the Dnieper River to Kiev. You may recall the "Orange Revolution" to protest the rigged elections of 2004. Since then, Ukraine has started changing rapidly under its newfound democracy. Tourism in this region has only recently been marketed in the US and we wanted to see it before it changed too much. The river cruise was probably a mistake. We prefer a little more adventure during our trips, but our group of 28 travelers had an average age of around 70. One man ended his trip early with a real cultural experience in a Turkish hospital after he fell and broke his hip in Istanbul. One unaccompanied traveler in her 80's showed up with a walker. She appeared to be suffering from the early stages of dementia. She insisted that she was completely independent, but she slowed the group down and made life rather difficult for the guides. We're told that the tour company authorized the walker against its own terms and conditions, so we are not recommending them to others. The only other person in our age bracket was a stylish man in his forties who accompanied a well-dressed lady of about 70. She sported a five-carat diamond ring. He was clearly not related to her by blood or marriage. Rob Schneider fans will understand why Rich immediately started referring to him as "Deuce."

We had been to Turkey two years ago, so we left the group for an independent tour of the Grand Bazaar, some mosques, a palace and a trip up the Bosphorus Straits on a public ferry. We're glad that we chose not to rent a car as gas cost almost \$12/gallon. It was a seven-hour bus ride across the border and on to Nesebar, Bulgaria. Nesebar is an ancient port town that has been taken over by European tourists on cheap all-inclusive summer package tours. Bulgaria and Romania are the lowest cost countries in the European Union, and they are filling a role similar to that of Mexican beach resorts. We enjoyed a few beers at a seaside restaurant before sailing to Tulcea, Romania. Tulcea is a small city on the Danube delta with a nice waterfront surrounded by some rather unfortunate Soviet era concrete apartment buildings. We found a monument to a former king lying on its side in the weeds in a small park. The scenery in the delta is pleasant enough, but similar to the St. Clair River delta in Michigan. We needed to move on to find excitement.

Life on board was pleasant but cramped. The weather was similar to Michigan in the summer. The waiters spoke a little English, but our cabin girl spoke none. The food was basic, but better than expected.

"Ukraine girls really knock me out, they leave the west behind."

There were lots of pretty girls in their twenties who acted as guides. We met many beautiful young ladies named Natalya, Nadya, Natasha, Tanya, Tatyana and Olga. One evening they conducted a Ukrainian wedding ceremony and Rich was selected to marry Nadya in full traditional costume. Things moved along quickly, and Rich and Nadya had considerable discussion for the rest of the cruise about whose turn it was to look after Little Richie.

"Show me 'round those snow-peaked mountains way down south, take me to your daddy's farm."

We made visits to the Black Sea ports of Odessa, Yalta and Sevastopol. From Odessa, we took a 14 hour bus tour to Chisinau, the capital of Moldova. Moldova is the poorest country in Europe. It still struggles with corruption in the post Soviet era and the roads are rough, but the countryside is nice with rolling hills and fields of wheat and sunflowers.

"Let me hear your balalaikas ringing out."

Odessa has many lovely buildings, monuments and parks. Sevastopol is the home to both the Ukrainian and Russian naval fleets. It has a nice panorama museum that really brings the Crimean War to life.

The highlight for us was Yalta. Every Russian dreams of a vacation in Yalta. This is an old Soviet beach resort where the Communist Party bigwigs came for summer vacation. The scenery is beautiful, but the Yalta beaches are crummy. They are narrow strips of pebbles surrounded by crumbling concrete breakwaters. Regardless of age or figure, the people strip down to Speedos and bikinis, give themselves a wedgie, and spend the day elbow-to-elbow on the crowded rocks. In the evening, they put on their best outfits and stroll the waterfront. One day, we abandoned the group and did a ten-mile hike to a castle hanging precariously on a cliff over the sea.

"Come and keep your comrade warm. I'm back in the U.S.S.R."

It took four dull days to cruise up the Dnieper River to Kiev. The river is a series of reservoirs with dams and locks. We made a stop in Kherson where we were taken to an elderly woman's house. She spent great effort pushing shots of homemade vodka on her guests. In Zaporozhye, Rich crashed some weddings and Cheryll met some new beer drinking buddies in the park.

"You don't know how lucky you are boys, back in the U.S.S.R."

Kiev is a wonderful city, with onion-domed cathedrals, monasteries and big squares. On Sunday evening, they closed some of the streets around Independence Square to traffic, and thousands of people come out for a stroll with a beer. We concluded our stay with a visit to the Chernobyl museum. It's been 22 years since the radioactive explosion less than 100 miles from Kiev. Tours are now being offered of the former nuclear reactor. If we'd allowed an extra day to visit, we might have been able to reach our adventure quota for this trip. Rich offered Nadya a divorce prior to our departure, but she wasn't interested.

We came to Ukraine largely because we are working our way down the list of world countries. We've compiled this list of the top ten reasons for you to consider a visit;

10. It's the perfect place to wear your new bright green outfit with yellow shoes,
9. The scenery on the Crimean coast is lovely,
8. The handbags are bigger than the shorts,
7. They claim to have the world's second best chocolate behind the Swiss,
6. You'll learn to appreciate beaches with sand,
5. Relaxing days on the river,
4. Chernobyl is now open to tourism, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chernobyl_disaster)
3. It's easy to select a Ukrainian bride on the internet,
2. Thousands of monuments stand testimony to fascinating history, and
1. Any time is Beer Time!

Maybe we'll be ready for another river cruise in twenty years or so.

"Back in the U.S.S...Back in the U.S.S...Back in the U.S.S.R"

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