

Three Days in Kiev

Last summer I travelled by train from Chisinau in Moldova to Kiev in Ukraine. This is a train that goes to Moscow but stops in Kiev on the way. The journey takes thirteen hours and if you travel by night, you don't need a hotel. If you take this train, remember that you can't take a nap when you get close to Kiev because you can end up in Russia if you don't wake up!

I love travelling by train. You have a lot of time to think about where you have been and you can read about the next place you are visiting. I think it's much more relaxing than flying. My train left Chisinau 11 PM and slept like a baby all night.

The next day, we stopped for quite a while on the border between Moldova and Ukraine. This is where I saw a guy carrying a child under his arm. The child seemed happy and relaxed so I guess this kid was OK. Anyway, travelling by train, you can see all sort of things from your train window.

There are 51 countries in Europe, and Ukraine was country number 49 for me to visit. I never stay very long in one place and I thought three days would be alright for Kiev.

I had booked the Ukraine Hotel in the centre of Kiev, but when the taxi driver stopped in front of the hotel, there was no name in English of the hotel anywhere, so I had to ask the taxi driver, "Are you sure this is the Ukraine Hotel?" He said, "Yes", so I got off.

The first thing I did after checking in was to go for a walk through the centre of town. Immediately I got out of the hotel, I saw Disney characters everywhere. Mickey Mouse came up to me and asked if I wanted to take a selfie with him. Well, I know nothing is for free so I asked Mickey how much money he wanted for this. He then took off his Mickey Mouse head and introduced himself. He was a university student and he said he had little money and this was a good way to earn extra cash. He added that ten euros would be nice. I felt sorry for him so we took some selfies together and I gave him a ten-Euro note. After that, I walked very quickly every time I saw a Disney character nearby.

When I arrive in a new city, I usually google "free walking tours" for my first sightseeing tour. I've got three reasons why I do this. First, guides who lead free walking tours usually work really hard and are often very funny because they know they only get good tips if people really like them. The better the guide, the bigger the tip. Secondly, you meet other visitors who are new to the city and you can make friends with them while you are walking. Thirdly, because you are walking, the pace is slower and you can ask as many questions as you want while walking.

Kiev is a big city with a very interesting history. I actually joined two walking tours on my second day. Our tour guide Vlad in the morning was very friendly and quite funny. Our guide in the afternoon, Daryna, needed to study history more, but she was also very funny.

I saw a lot of things during my three days in Kiev, but here are the ones I remember the most:

- St Michael's Cathedral. I will never forget the blue colour.
- The "Hedgehog in the Fog". This is famous because this hedgehog was in a kids' movie 35 years ago and locals know about it.

- The Old Town in Kiev. I particularly liked some of the street art.
- Pinchuk ArtCentre. I always try to visit a modern art museum everywhere I go, and I really liked this one. My favourites were some huge paintings by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, a room full of giant vases, and a real soldier staring into a corner. Is that art? Well, I was tempted to talk to him, but I didn't in the end. What can you ask? "Are you art?"
- Kiev-Pechersk Lavra. This is a famous monastery that is almost as big as a town, and there are some amazing churches there. You can't go inside in shorts, so a group of Arabic-speaking tourist I saw had to cover their legs.
- The Mezhyhirya Residence. This is where the former president Yanukovich used to live, but now it's a museum. I spent half a day here. The grounds are amazing, his main house is spectacular (I managed to take a picture of the inside by pressing my iPhone against a window), and his car collection incredible. You can also feel like a president sitting in a special chair.

Before I travelled to my next country – Belarus – I walked around the centre of town again. The atmosphere was really relaxed with lots of people everywhere. I hope I can visit Kiev again!