

From Ukraine to Bratislava the travel went.

And so I boarded the train from Chernivtsi to Uzghorod and traveled through Carpathians by night with off beat Ukrainian songs playing on the non-optional radio. The compartment was a krupe. I picked the top bunk--24 inches wide-- to be high up, not wanting someone else to be up there as such a thing makes me feel crowded, but then the dilemma was that I was off the ground. I also thought if for any reason an unsavory character attempted to steal things from me I'd have the advantage of readily being able to kick them in the head or fall on them deliberately. Although this would hurt, it would comfort me to know that it hurt them more, befitting a thief. I'm not too fastidious for corporal punishment.

As it turned out I am not an avid train rider and find the shaky rides the height of discomfort but I managed myself by being an ardent juice drinker and Advil swallower. We stopped at every half built station on the way to Uzghorod but the krupe never changed, I won't describe it because it would depress me to admit the reality of the conditions but suffice to say it achieved adventurer worthy status. Furthermore it is unwise to examine things too closely and far better to remember them as half as painful as they really were and describe them as half more worse than expected, thereby achieving the closest approximation to reality.

From Uzghorod we took a bus to the Slovak border and I could see my breath while inside. The landscape was endless fields of white broken only by trees and hills and the occasional village. At first nothing seemed to change but as we got further west the little towns began to look romantic and colorful and cute and far more European than Soviet.

I was slightly more than unamused when the money changer refused to work with me when I asked if he spoke English, then Russian, then Ukrainian and then French, only to find out afterwards he likely at least understands the Slavic languages and was just being stubborn. Seriously now come on, I go to all this effort to learn them and how many other American tourists will come wandering around in the dead of winter in a language he can at least comprehend and therefore should make the effort.

Now I am in Bratislava and can't believe I have hot water to bath with, the toilet paper seems too soft to use, and there are restaurants and food from all over the world and there is a book store with books in English. I am in shock, happy happy shock. I saw the American Embassy, ate spinach tortellini for dinner and tiramisu for dessert.

There are more castles here than any other part of Europe.

Bratislava is really lovely and cold and wintry and reminds me vaguely of London in winter but not quite.

I walked until my feet wanted to fall off yesterday and had an amazing time and today must visit some sort of castle or museum or I will have failed at the European experience.

No one thinks I look like an American with my Ukrainian girl clothes, and mixing English, Ukrainian and Russian. I have been confused with being Austrian 3 times now. I am amused.

The food is amazing. I adore this place, but maybe it is just because it seems like an unreal fantasy land after Ukraine. While I like the adventures I have in Ukraine the ability to take simple things for granted in a non-existent luxury there, and the fact that there is water in every restaurant and hot water at that to wash your hands, seems unreal. Never mind people who can understand what I am saying, which is awesome but kind of disconcerting, as I feel I have been running a monologue only I can comprehend the whole time I was in Ukraine and now it seems like there are listeners.

There is coffee in a little cafe on the square that houses the Greek, Japanese and French Embassies. If I was an ambassador I would have coffee there every day. It seems too luxurious for words, and yet it is half the price of a Starbucks concoction. It is an old world cafe-soda shop, with trays of cakes lined up in a refrigerated window display and the menus are in three languages-Slovak, German, and English, and there is Amaretto Coffee that doesn't taste like battery acid, which I had come to expect from further East. They light little candles on the table and water comes in glass Evian bottles.

There are bookstores with books in English, but even though the prices are less than US, I have somehow come to feel like spending that much on a book--\$5--or 25 hrv--is too much and they are more for admiring on the shelf as the unique smell of printed books wafts through the air.

At night the streets are lit up and the medieval architecture is thrown into relief against the black sky, the Danube looks small and smooth from the top of the Hrad castle, and the goulash at the Slovak pub is spicy and fiery and deliciously hearty. Couples wander around without hard and bitter expressions on their faces and statues sneak up on you and are a surprise every few feet.

Tomorrow I am going to Vienna to drink coffee and walk around.

Lots of love, Meg